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### Interview with Jose Banzon

Cecil B. Currey

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Tape 1 - Interview with Jose Banzon at Bohannon's, Manila, Republic of the Philippines - 30 July 1985 - page 1

B: ....a guerrilla leader and I was a captain in the Army, and we got together when he was being offered the position of secretary of national defense. You know, he is not a professional soldier; he was a guerrilla leader, and he asked me, what will I tell President Quirino? Well, I told him, you tell him we are going to fight this war in an unconventional way. Tell him they are making a mistake to think this is a regular war, this is very different. And so on, and so on, and so on.. And that is just what he told President Quirino. I said, you tell him we will send all the officers in the Army headquarters out in the field. There are so many of them hiding behind desks, they will all go out in the field. Tell him that we are going to use dogs, we will use everything that we can think of. This is a different kind of warfare. He got the job, and when he got the job, I said, now, I am in Bangkok as military attachee in Bangkok; so I told him, I am going back now. Oh, Lord, you stay with me--I will make you my chief of intelligence. I said, no, that doesn't sound good--you the secretary and me--no, it doesn't sound good. I said, you let me go back to the war and I will pick up some more new ideas and I will let you know. So I went to the war in Vietnam, and after that I went to the war in Maylasia. I tried to find out the experience of the French, and then the experience of the British...well, I got commended, the secretary, chief of staff, was sending me wires; and then all of a sudden, you are recalled, you come home. To stay with him and sit down beside him; my gosh this is going to be a boring job. I like the open, I like the... then I found out why. He had one assistant, Col. Regal (sp?) who was my brother-in-law. Col. Regal (sp?) was another guerrilla fighter, once a professional soldier, but he was more of a poet and a writer than a soldier. And his wife and my wife were sisters. You know, he was Magsaysay's assistant



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B: and I knew why, he wants to leave. This is terrible. And I saw mounds of papers on top of the table. I said, this is not the way to run a war with all these papers ...

Background voice: ...still secretary of national defense?

B: He was secretary of national defense. So I went over all the papers and then at 7 o'clock in the morning I went in the house of Magsaysay. I was very angry because I was relieved. I didn't want to be chair-bound; I want to be in the field. He knew that I didn't like the job. The very first time, after breakfast, I say, you sign these. At first I didn't know the trick. You know, he was signing, and all of a sudden he would say, ah, that is enough. I am very, very tired. Then I learned how to hide all the papers under the table. I put only one paper up. He never knew how many papers he was signing. So in that way after two days he went back to the office and said, what happened to all the papers on this table? I said, you have signed them all. That is how we got along, because he could not find any more paper after that. For the next two years we were together.. In short, it was a combination of his guerrilla knowledge and my professional knowledge; by that time I was also a graduate of Ft. Benning, I was a graduate already of the commander \_\_\_\_\_ school...

C: In Ft. Leavenworth...

J: ...in Ft. Leavenworth, and I was a graduate already of the intelligence school in Ft. Wiley (sp?). So I was very professional. During the war I was a battalion commander. And it was a good combination. In the beginning I didn't believe he will be a great man. But I came to pick up certain characteristics in him that were really very genuine, very sincere, and along that track, we went along. \_\_\_\_\_ first a very deep sense of justice, a very



B:        deep sense of justice (unintelligible) and to the smallest things. Second, it is as I said sincerity. You have got to be very sincere, not because of your political objective, but because that is how you feel about it. Third, you are always in a hurry. Things that we feel should have been done yesterday, are still undone today, and they should have been finished long ago. Time is always of the essence. And fourth is the personal touch. We do not (dogs barking, unintelligible). We approach men, as man to man. (summary: example of someone comes in wanting job; find out more about him; try to find job. Specialized attention). What else? I used to tell him he was subversive of good discipline--because you bypass all the intervening layers of command. You go direct. I said what is your justification for that? You know what he told me? Emergency. (summary: conversation, I studied law, judge every case on decisions on similar case). He said, no, to me, every case is a new case. What can you do with a man who thinks that every case is a new case? Therefore, every case had to be studied in all its angles. There is something good about that, you know. You know that is something with Magsaysay, telling me that no, there is no precedent; every case is a new case. And I decide all the cases.

C:        How did you come to meet General Lansdale?

B:        Well, ok, those were the years when we were fighting hard against the Huks. Here come Ed. Who was the president then, Eisenhower?

C:        Yes.

B:        Well, Ike, naturally has a deep liking for Magsaysay. Also whenever United States ?? in a country there is instability and the national interests are involved, naturally the U.S. will look for the strong man. Right? And if the strong man happens to fit the description of that ideal man, the better. They will back up that man--right? And so here came in Magsaysay and this is just like



B: the man. You know, from everything that you hear about him, he is the man. And the American way is naturally, I will give you support. And there is no limit to that support. And the fellow believes also in the cause of that man, and the two are identifiable. The fight against the Huks. And so the two came to like each other. Ed was softspoken, very humble, with lots of initiative, new ideas. Somebody who was very much like Magsaysay right away. When Ed came in, I don't know whether he was attached to MAAG right away, psychological warfare or something. I said to Magsaysay, what is the difference, adviser of what or what, so long as he is there, then us will progress. Us will face more problems, we became more and more dependent on the man who can give us ideas and support. And so the meetings become more frequent. They have their own safe houses where to meet, and the two became so intimate. And you know, Magsaysay he is so simple; he does not have the trappings of a potentate. He wants to be a simple farmer. And that's how the two came to like each other. They have similar tastes; one is innovative, the other one is very receptive. The other one is brave and willing to take the risk. I can see quickly when one gives him a formula he picks it up quickly, and off they go. The idealism. I was not very much involved with them, because we were/<sup>trained</sup>in the Army not to indulge in politics. We were not even allowed to vote at that time. We were strictly neutral, when it comes to politics. I myself have no love for politics. My father was a congressman. My father forced me to transfer from engineering to law, thinking that I would follow his footsteps. (summary: leader in high school). So when Magsaysay was having these things with Ed, I would not bother--I stayed to my job.

Ed and me got close in Vietnam, after we are through the Huks there.



B: There was the Dien Bien Phu, was being fought. I went there, because the Geneva Conference (summary:??going to Geneva, didn't know what happening in Indochina, so I was sent. No diplomatic relations with Vietnam. French really running whole show.) Went as observer, supposed to stay only for 3 months, but developed on into 5 years, because 4 months later on, Ed arrived. And when Ed arrived he said, Joe, will you give me a briefing? I gave him briefing, and he said, wait awhile. I will take notes, and that became 3 hour briefings because we discussed what we should do the next 2 years. At that time I could see the future, uncanny feeling I could see what was coming. So I told him what we have to do in Indochina, that is government of the people, by the people and for the people in order to be viable. At that time the Vietnamese were holding only 4 ministries, and the bulk of the ministries were being held by the French. How can you call this a Vietnamese government? You are just fooling yourself. The French are behind the whole thing. Dien Bien Phu was being fought and there was the possibility of the French getting defeated, and we had to start a new political order. Naturally we start thinking, and so I told him, where to make the independence of the Vietnamese real and that means the French has to get out. Of course, that was at that time not too acceptable to the French (summary: French holding on to their powers to end. I said must strive for new constitution, and Asian brothers called in to help; find way for Vietnamese to express through ballot; establish a government; foremost will be security. Also I told him of Philippine history; how Americans established government here; MacArthur was here; started on political reforms. Everything still has to be militarily defended. Philippine can be model in Vietnam, I said.) Under that first planning we took up helping the government achieve some kind of stability with a better interior force, not a fighting army, but the interior force. We sent Vietnamese in big groups here



B: to study. And we organized in Vietnam RFP...

C: Regional Force...

B: So the thing is that I said that from my government you know we are a small country, don't have much to give, but we can assist. And I said to my mind, the place where we can assist and not get into the line of fire of the French is in the medical field. I told Ed that perhaps we could help in the alleviation of the problems in Vietnam at that time by sending medical teams in Vietnam. We implemented that not only there but in Laos. Then, of course, we had a successful year in the Philippines in what we called the civic actions, the approach to the people. I said that since the United States forces that might be involved in Vietnam will need assistance in some way, in a technical way, then we have to get the technicians from the Philippines. That became the proposal for the Freedom Company. We started from scratch. Ed, myself. The American embassy was at that time was not an embassy, it was a legation. And so for me my immediate proposal was for medical teams to come in. It is a starting point. It is humanitarian, so the French could not say, you are intervening, interfering. French difficult; would not allow Vietnamese to go out...you know, I went to Vietnam prior to that for one week, in November 1950, and on November 11, that is the Armistice Day, I was invited to the house of the American minister to celebrate Armistice Day. I met the chief of the USIS. I was asked on what role can the Philippines play in Vietnam? (material omitted--sat beside an American on a plane. How can Philippines and Vietnamese get along? Minister, dentist, boyscouts got out of Saigon, came to Philippines.) In Vietnam you never present a project as your project, but as a Vietnamese project. That's how we pushed through all of our programs in Vietnam, as a Vietnamese project. (material omitted: a Filipino



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B: said he knew author of a project is Banzon; Banzon told him to shut up.) So everything is in the name of the Vietnamese.

C: You said you stayed in Saigon 4 years...What was your position there?

B: 5 years. First as a military observer, and later on I had to work for the <sup>27</sup> recognition ~~mission~~/of Vietnam by the Philippines. It was an issue in the Philippines. There were politicians who were fighting Magsaysay against the recognition Philippine government extending / to the government of Vietnam. But once opened we had been able to extend recognition, we ~~open~~ diplomatic relations.

C: When was that done?

B: Later part of '56, I think. And I was the first military attachee. I got Magsaysay to sign the papers one evening when we went out driving, and when we come back, I said, you sign. Magsaysay: too much opposition. (omitted: conversation about signing, not signing). He signed it.

Bo wanted to get the papers and fly it himself. We said, no. (omitted: then I run back to Vietnam. Everybody say hurry, waiting for you. I say have to change to my barong. Went to palace, press there.) You know why the president was in a hurry? That day was the anniversary of the \_\_\_\_\_ of Vietnam, and early in the morning there was a big mob, sacked the Majestic Hotel (American socialite there, omitted). And the president wanted a counter on that very day to show the world there is one country that recognizes them. It was a long story.

C: In what ways did you work with General Lansdale during those 4 years?

B: We did it together. First, you know, I have no logistics whatsoever. Meaning, I can give you ideas but that's all. It is run by itself. So my role is this: I know more of the Asian psychology. I am an Asian. I know the Vietnamese. The American is suspect by the Vietnamese; this is why from the



B: shoes of the French, you see. But when it is a Filipino who, it is another thing; a brother. Somebody who puts the American closer to the Vietnamese. That's our role. And so when I call all my relatives to go to Vietnam to start Operation Brotherhood. Oscar Arrellano, his father was my godfather. And Oscar Arrellano went to Saigon with Monching \_\_\_\_\_. Monching is now ambassador to Canada. These two went there and they said, we are bringing medicines for a clinic. And then Dr. Wong (sp?), a Chinese doctor who is a very civic spirited man was the one with the JC's. So they talked of having more substantial assistance through the JC's of Saigon by medicine. I said, you don't go into this retail business. Let's go into wholesale. I said, do you not know that Vietnam is getting divided, and there will be an exodus of thousands of people from the north, and these people all will need medical attention and somebody to attend to them. And that is we (summary; giving medicine). So the JC of the Philippines bought it, but the mayor of Manila hated and the papers of Manila were also hitting us, why we generous to that sort of people, be generous to our own. Anyway, the first group arrived. The U.S. embassy will not believe me when I say I need visa for 7 people. Yes, 7 people. Ok, issue visa; U.S. embassy arranged visa. That is how we started Operation Brotherhood. Now this is a medical operation, supposed to be from people to people, actually can never get off the ground by itself. Our own medicines would not go far, but that's how we started in Vietnam. We really want this because it will force the Vietnamese to do it themselves.

half  
Now, we started small, small, small, but then this whole/peninsula was dumped into the hands of the Republic of Vietnam. This is the whole south you know occupied by the Vietnamese (material omitted). I organized them into mobile teams. Ed was with me already, and Ed understands the



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B: whole thing. And so Bo is here and Bo is the Manila manager, you know; what we ask, Bo produces. And they start coming from the plane direct to Camau because we were going to take over Camau at midnight, and they arrived in the afternoon and we have enough time only to go from the airport to go to the Peninsula ? of Camau, and on midnight, take over. That was very dramatic. The Viet Cong was already there. When we...

(pause on tape)

...send the medicine by air, air drop, and save the person, things like that, every day. Say this is your government, this is your own government now. President Diem, he went there. The chief of staff, he went there.

(summary: I got pass from Viet Minh, and entered at \_\_\_\_, no roads, all by canal. Officer there surrounded by Vietnamese, his name is Duc (?). Duc say shout across every night; contest in psychological warfare...)

END OF TAPE 1

TAPE 2

...

B: ...we met him on the street in Saigon. When he see me he will grab me and embrace me and cry and cry in the middle of the street..

You know, there are people who will say that the Vietnamese cannot be trusted; it is not always true. I have Vietnamese friends who stood fast with us through thick and thin up to the end. Ed himself had his very close friends, Vietnamese.

C: Why do you think it was that Lansdale, an American, was able to work so well with Filipinos and Vietnamese?



B: Because Ed knows the psychology. Second, Ed is very sincere. He does not do it for anything else but for sincerity. Ed, he opens his heart. He is misunderstood, all these people--they don't know Ed. He is a person that is very warm. He is not one of those who will pretend to be your friend for ulterior motives--no. He is so straight, you see. And this was true of Magsaysay also. Very simple, simple tastes; very human, down to earth. No airs, no air of nothing. It is like monks, like monks, you know. One time Magsaysay pulled me in the plane because I had so many papers for him to sign. We landed in Calgayan (phonetic?) and he was wearing a straw hat and the people there were laughing. Mr. Secretary, why are you wearing that hat? (summary: he recited poem, about poor and simple, etc. I almost cried listening to him.) One time he was with Ed. ~~(summary:--wanted-to-walk-on-beach-at-Barong-(sp?))~~ The day before he died I with with him; he said why are you bringing President Diem? He told me he just wants to walk with you in the beach. President Magsaysay said, ok, we will walk in the beach at Barong (sp?). And then the next day, he died. Of course I flew the next day--the President was walking back and forth in the palace, always calling me, was there any news. Two people who were also like monks, you know. President Diem mourned President Magsaysay.

You know during the war against the Viet Minh, Ed must have told you, in the mountain of Neubaodin (phonetic), that is the black lady mountain, there was a Vietnamese general by the name of Trinh Minh The (?) who was a very, very close friend of Ed's. We used to air drop aid to Trinh Minh The, and Trinh Minh The and me came to know each other, and he is another very simple man. And all he wanted was to see Magsaysay, and I arranged it, for him to come here and meet the President, but then there was this uprising inside Saigon and Trinh Minh The, you know, led...you know, what the French were doing was



B: helping the rebels and trying to prevent them from being cut off from the rear. And Trinh Minh The led his forces across the river, on the bridge, he was shot. He died. President Ngo Dinh Diem cried. Ed was (unintelligible)

This charm of Ed's, very sincere. As I said, a very sincere man.

C: Let me ask you one more question, sir. I didn't quite understand your relationship with Louise (?) Magsaysay.

B: Louise is my cousin.

C: I thought you were her brother.

B: No, no. She was not my brother. Louis Magsaysay's father is Jose Banzon, the same as my name. And her sister was my classmate in high school; we are distant cousins.

C: Not even first cousins?

B: Not even first cousins. But when I first started Magsaysay thought I was very close to her and he picks me out (unintelligible) but later on so...

So the life of Magsaysay and the life of Ed, you know, they have common ideals.

Ed asked me one time, did we do wrong in Vietnam? I said, no. I said, if we did not do what we did in Vietnam, it would not have lasted that long. Because in 1950 after the fall of Dien Bien Phu, the people were demoralized; the people were selling their houses; everybody was moving to Europe, to France. You can buy cars very, very cheap. Just a matter of time before the Viet Minh will take over. That was the time when we came in. And that is the time when we <sup>worked?</sup> walked so hard. Ed will <sup>work?</sup> walk so hard until you can see his eyes are twitching. He <sup>worked?</sup> walked so hard. It was not so easy to make a people make a stand, a people who feel defeated already; make a stand. The first thing we have to give them is some kind of hope. At that time there was a government but the ministers



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B: do not want even to go to office. Go to their houses, in their pajamas, drags them out; we have got a job to do. It was just a question of time. That is, I think, the biggest contribution of Ed; it could have ended very much earlier, this fall of Vietnam. You see from the period of Dien Bien Phu when everything is zero, up, up up. We at least had an Army that fought. We had a government that at times knew what it was doing. President Diem was all right until he became a little hardheaded. His brother--I told him early to get rid of his brother. And we went in a celebration in the Delta. After that he took another plane, and we flew to a coastal town, we went aboard a ship. That's the first time he went on board a ship in Vietnam. I was laughing because there is no saluting gun; we had only an anti-aircraft gun, and we fired the gun up. We were laughing. Saluted the President. In the evening I was the only one (unintelligible). The president liked to read what some director is telling about you? Yes. I work for newspaper (summary: better read. Then didn't want to go on in war. Philippine senator called him so and so and so). Then I told him: Mr. President, do you know one Philippine president lost his office because of a brother. President Quirino lost an election because of a brother, Tony Quirino, because of a scandal. I said, why don't you remove Ngo Dinh Nuh?

C: What was his response?

B: Do you know what his response was? He grow very red, and he refuse to talk to me. Later on, years later on, you know I left. I went to Indonesia, and my friends told me, get back, get back; the president is surrounded by people who are very bad. It is too late. He said, some people are saying things about my brother, but all that my brother does, I know, and everything that my brother does, I approve. I said, that's the end. The brother is the



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B: one that took down Ngo Dinh Diem. Madam Nhu and Mr. Nhu. President Ngo Dinh Diem, I don't know--sometimes the Vietnamese do not want to be told, you know. But if he removed Ngo Dinh Nhu at that time and he went straight, maybe that could have helped him. Not entirely, but help him.

C: Well, Mr. Banzon, I have taken up an awful lot of your time...

B: So many things, you know...

I think another aspect of Ed's, he had to fight fellow Americans, you know, in the Embassy. Members of the USIS, chief of USIS, the military, and the political advisers, and so on and so on. Many times he comes out and tells us.

One thing good, Ed's support of his colleagues. He got a lot of support. He was so well respected. Westmoreland listens to him. At the time, Habib was there also. Porter. Who was...American ambassador...

C: Sulphuric acid. HCL--Henry Cabot Lodge. (omitted about HCL). Abrams.

B: Not Abrams...among the ambassadors...

C: Oh, Taylor. Taylor had a hard time.

We could have ended the fighting earlier. You know why? The \_\_\_\_\_ general wanted to surrender to us, just only...the proper conditions...

INTERVIEW ENDS



Jose Banzon interview, 30 July 1985

~~Ed was very soft-spoken, very humble, with lots of initiative, new ideas.  
 . . . M was so simple . . . he wanted to be a farmer. They [EGL & M]  
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At that time the VNese were holding only 4 ministries and the bulk of the ministries were being held by the French. How can you call this a VNese govt?